Creating Third Space through Critical Interactions in a High School: Examining Latin@ Students’ Experiences in Neocolonial Society

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Abstract

English Learners (ELs) often face school environments dominated by White, English speaking values, history, and education practices. This qualitative action research study focuses on the third space development for ELs, all Latin@ students, in a high school mainstream English Language Arts classroom within a post-colonial theoretical framework. The study’s primary focus explores how third space could be opened in a high school classroom through teacher facilitation of critical interaction. The researchers collected data through video observation, student interviews, and teacher reflective journals. The study grew to examine third space throughout the school community in various classrooms using the insights and reflections of the students in the English language classroom, the high school teacher, and a teacher educator. Through the analysis, we found that teachers have ability to actively pursue and facilitate third space, even in a school context that is influenced heavily by dominant history and practices.

Keywords: secondary schools, English language learners, post-colonial theory, critical interactions, third space, teacher action research
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Creating Third Space through Critical Interactions in a High School: Examining Latin@ Students’ Experiences in Neocolonial Society

Introduction

English Learners (ELs)\(^1\) often face school environments dominated by White, English speaking values, history, and education practices. Even in schools where ELs are the majority, the education system is designed to meet the needs of English speaking students (Faltis, 2010; Nieto, 2005; Wright, 2010). In the Western United States, a large portion of the ELs are Latin@\(^2\) students. Often, ELs exist in a culture at home different than the normed school environment (Olsen, 1997; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). That school environment is also typical of the White, middle-class culture that dominates society.

Each day, ELs come to school and bring identities from their home culture that are not recognized in most school settings (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Throughout their educational careers, ELs navigate a neocolonial education system that has marginalized their identity (Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2012). Often, students of color are dominated in the classroom environment, resulting in a colonized space of the White oppressor, whether they are a teacher or a student. However, the “third space” (Bruna, 2009; Benson, 2010; Gutierrez, 2008) has the possibility to usurp the colonial dominance and establish an emancipatory space in classrooms. In this way, third space is transformative, combining student’s home, community, and school

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\(^1\) We use the term English learner (EL) to refer to a student who is in the process of learning English and/or has been classified as an EL at sometime during the time they were enrolled at the district. In this study, all the ELs at the school were Latin@s of Mexican origin. We do understand that not all Mexican origin or Latin@ students are ELs.

\(^2\) Latin@ is used throughout the text to refer to both male and female students, rather than using other determiners such as “Latino and Latina” or “Latino/a” because it is gender neutral, compared to “Latino” when referring to a group. When talking about a single student, we use either Latino or Latina depending on gender, for groups of both male and female we use Latin@.
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cultures to promote innovation in learning (Fitts, 2009). The third space, as an emancipatory entity, allows new, creative possibilities for the individuals in the system, where students who are traditionally non-dominant in that classroom culture express new learning, grab individual power, and access different material. In classrooms, this raises exciting potential where students create new learning and positive experiences through the third space. However, students often need a teacher-facilitator to help them build the third space. This study, conducted by a high school English teacher and teacher educator, explores the relationship between third space and student learning during peer and teacher interaction shedding light on how teachers might better facilitate third space, as well as the negative ways racism and isolation can perpetuate colonial spaces in the classroom. Our definition of racism intertwines with colonialism as it includes economic, political, social, linguistic, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power between White people and people of color (DiAngelo, 2011; Feagin, 2013; Macedo, 2000; Mills, 1999). As Macedo explains one example of racism as it intersects with language, “If we analyze closely the ideology that informs the present debate over bilingual education and the present polemic over the primacy of Western heritage versus multiculturalism, we can begin to see and understand that the ideological principles that sustain those debates are consonant with the structures and mechanisms of a colonial ideology designed to devalue the cultural capital and values of the colonized” (p. 20). Feagin (2001) claims that most White citizens of the United States do not know their colonialist history of the US and Mexican border that makes it easier to rationalize their racist attacks on Mexican immigrants. Relevant to our study, the language of the Mexican-American students was marked as was their skin color.
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While working with the ESL programs in the district, we realized that although the schools were cutting edge in their application of ESL sheltered instruction, the critical attention to social connections that promote student learning were missing within the school. Many students were not connecting with their lessons and their peers, even with extensive SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) implementation (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Teachers, despite using SIOP, were not recognizing the consequences of systemic racism and isolation in their own classrooms (Crawford, 2015). Through observations and interviews, the high school teacher realized students lacked a third space and were usually identified by their deficits rather than their strengths as learners (Gay, 2000; González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2012). In whole class and small group interactions, many of them existed as the “other”, a minority group within the school culture. Their social position molded by a neocolonial system inhibited their ability to learn. With this educational context in mind, we aimed to answer these questions through critical qualitative teacher action research:

1. How is third space creation impacted by critical interaction between students, their peers, and the teacher in the classroom?

2. What are the social factors that impact third space creation during critical interaction?

**Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

Third space originates in the writings of Homi Bhabha (1994), who believed when a colonizer encountered a colonized people, third space appeared as hybrid space between two cultures. The two groups became reliant on one another, making them “mutually dependent in constructing a shared culture,” (as cited in Yazdiha, 2010, pp. 31-32). The shared culture allowed both groups to create new, positive contributions in the third space. The classroom functions as a metaphor for colonialism with the White school structure dominating the identity
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of all other cultural groups (DiAngelo, 2011). Young (2001) defines the leftover policies of colonialism on American education as cultural neocolonialism. Cultural neocolonialism marginalizes students who do not identify with the dominant culture in power, creating a superior-inferior binary and reinforcing deficit identification between groups of students. Students of color are left to navigate the neocolonial structures in the classroom, and without teacher facilitation this inhibits production of third space. To counteract the power of the White school structure and push back against notions of a binary, the classroom third space allows new, creative outcomes from the students using Funds of Knowledge (González, Moll, Amanti, 2005) and skills from the student’s home culture in third space.

As previously mentioned, in third space, a “hybrid space is created when classroom members bring together elements of school culture and home culture to create something new” (Carlone & Johnson, 2012, p. 155). However, in our study, we noted that often the learning potential of third space is bypassed in favor of the status quo, a colonized spaced that we noted was imbued with racism and isolation. Moje et al. (2004) discuss the idea of the colonizer in relation to texts, stating, “the privileged position of certain discourses in academic texts is akin to the privilege accorded to the ways of knowing of the colonizers” (p. 43). Moje et al. (2004) then expands “Texts” to a broader idea of learning, including all “academic knowledges and Discourse” (p. 43). In this way, the academic knowledge and skills that encompass the schooling experience, from academic texts and content to ways of discussing and social relationships are all valued only in terms of their position within the dominant culture. Moje et al. (2004) further applies Bhabha to education, stating “academic knowledges and Discourses need not be accorded an absolute and exclusive privilege, precisely because there is potential for the rearticulation of both academic and everyday knowledges…” (p. 43). With this foundational
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view, we also acknowledge Barton and Tan’s (2008) view that “acts of creating hybrid spaces, Discourses and identities, are always political and of the highest risk for those whose knowledge, Discourse, and identities are positioned as lesser” (p. 52). For students and teachers, the emancipatory power of third space for the learning of non-dominant groups is ripe with the politics of the environment in which the hybrid space is created. In our case, the politics includes the dominance of White students and teachers in a colonized space where Latin@ student’s voices are often not valued in the classroom (Macedo, 2000).

Problematically, students do not always have the skills to create third space and require facilitation from the teacher to encourage third space instead of colonized space in student interactions. Partly, this is because they live in a colonized and racialized space that is difficult to recognize. Just as students need help navigating texts and content within a hybrid space (Moje et al. 2004, p. 44) they also need help navigating the social and cultural aspects in the third space. Our study focuses specifically on this issue, the problems and solutions to navigating the social aspects of the classroom, especially those infused with cultural dominance. The ability to navigate could result in a third space, and the inability could lead to continued colonized dominance from the students and teachers traditionally in power.

In this study, we examine third space as a potential new space for student learning as it combines the student’s home culture and school culture. Third space does not exist when racism and isolation are present or when White students or White culture dominate the space. We will visit an example later that shows the negative consequences for Latin@ students when systemic racism, isolation, and White dominance exist simultaneously in a classroom. That particular relationship is colonial. We argue that in order for third space to exist, the white students must not dominate the space due to their racial position in the education system, and Latin@ students
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must be empowered to create and learn and lead. We also must acknowledge that realistically, third space does not exist exclusively between Latin@ and White students in a global context. However, for this study, we are specifically looking at that interaction, between Latin@ and White students and teachers. This is not to say that the third space is a binary, or that we are viewing it as Latin@ versus White; a “one or the other” philosophy. Instead, we see third space as a completely new possibility, a “transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152).

Faltis, Arias, and Ramírez-Marín (2010), Gándara (2010), and Menken and Kleyn (2009) all state that the critical resource in any school is the teacher. Unfortunately, often the majority of teachers who are White are not prepared to work with English learners in their classroom (Feinauer & Cutri, 2012). These teachers do not recognize their White privilege within a neocolonial society (DiAngelo, & Özlem, 2014; Howard, 2006; Kohli, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Singleton, 2013; Vaught & Castango, 2008). Even when they do have awareness of White privilege and the unique needs of ELs, teachers do not have the support or strategies necessary to meet the needs of these students from their administration or teacher preparation programs (Coles-Ritchie, 2009).

To understand the depth of the tensions the students and teachers were facing when working to support language learners, we considered two different theories. First, we looked at Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH) that has a significant following within the field of second language acquisition when addressing student interaction. Second, we added the lens of post-colonial theory to shine the light on the oppressive spaces where teachers attempt to lower the affective filter. The AFH helps describe the impact of third space on students.
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Krashen (1982) cites three primary factors related to the affective filter: self-confidence, motivation, and anxiety. Decreasing self-confidence, declining motivation, and increasing anxiety are all directly related to colonized classroom space. In classrooms with colonized space, students have an increased affective filter, which inhibits learning. In third space, the affective filter decreases and improves learning (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2010). However, postcolonial theory offers an important additional lens because teachers are challenged to find ways to lower the affective filter when neocolonial structures, whether hidden or overt, are present in the classroom. Schools, as bastions of Western Culture in the United States, are major purveyors of the dominant culture, going back hundreds of years in European Colonial history (Young, 2001). Colonialism is the elephant in the room in all schools. The affective filter exists within the post-colonial system, not despite the post-colonial system. In our study, we focused on how the students interact with peers and teachers within a post-colonial classroom, realizing that Krashen offers a theoretical framework for how students learn during these interactions.

For the students in the study, these contacts in small group, one-on-one, and whole class instruction created Critical interaction (CI), which happened when ELs (all Latin@s) were interacting directly with their White, English-speaking peers and teacher, all while manipulating content knowledge. The interaction was defined as “critical” because it was actively reflective. In groups, minority students were processing the content material as they considered the social implications of the interaction within the group. For example, in CI between a Latino student and his table group of three White students, the Latino student manipulated the content while also considering how White students perceived his Latino identity. Students create membership into the classroom community in part through the social roles they construct during peer interaction (Zeungler 1993, as cited in Verplaetse, 2000). To help students build this beneficial
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membership, teachers facilitate CI that allows co-construction of knowledge, lowers the affective filter, and acknowledges the role neocolonial structures play in the classroom. If constructed effectively, this can empower Latin@ students to learn and teach White students to engage in the learning without dominating the space.

Further complicating CI is the role of second language (L2) learning in content classrooms. Many teachers emphasize small group interaction as a foundation for instruction. In content classrooms, ELs are encouraged to communicate with native English speakers during small group and one-on-one interactions. Verplaetse (2000) identified two beneficial components of these types of interactions for ELs: academic language development and second language development. If ELs are going to grow academically they need to be constantly interacting with their English-speaking peers. However, the language benefits named by Verplaetse from interaction are difficult to reconcile with post-colonial theory and Krashen’s AFH. The challenge for teachers is organizing the interaction recommended by Verplaetse necessary for L2 development, while understanding the influence of post-colonial theory and the AFH within those interactions. CI became a way to analyze the confluence of post-colonial theory, AFH, and the language benefits of interaction.

In the study, we identified three types of CI. First, CIs happen between two or more students with at least one student being Latin@ (currently classified as an EL or formerly classified as an EL) and one or more students being White. This CI is classified as Student-to-Student Interaction (S2S). Secondly, a variation of the STS interaction is Student-to-Student Teacher Facilitated Interaction (S2ST). This is group interaction between ELs and White students where the teacher has tightly structured the activity. An example could be a four-person group where the teacher has assigned students individual roles with specific talking points and
structured interaction. The students are expected to interact in a specific manner based on the role assignment. The third CI is Student-to-Teacher interaction (S2T). These are the interactions where a teacher engages a Latin@ student. These CIs in other circumstances could consist of different student and teacher ethnic combinations, but at the studied school the CIs are all Latin@ students engaging with White teachers.

Teachers’ awareness of third space and having strategies to facilitate third space improves the overall classroom culture (Bruna, 2009). If ELs can create third space and White students can learn to engage within the space without dominance, that is effective for both the ELs learning and the overall social experience of all students in the classrooms. Aligning with Bhabha (1994), we believe the two are mutually dependent, so that learning will improve for the ELs when third space is created, because they can engage in constructing knowledge without White student dominance. While third space can happen on a macro-scale, such as throughout the entire school, it can also exist in microcosms, such as within small-group work during a classroom lesson. In that case, the students working within the group are building third space through their CI with one another and the presence of the facilitating educator.

**Method**

This qualitative action research study focuses on the third space for ELs, all Latin@ students, in a high school mainstream English Language Arts classroom. The study’s primary focus was how third space could be created in the classroom by observing critical interaction on video and discussing critical interaction through student interviews and focus groups. However, the study grew to examine third space throughout the school community in various classrooms using the insights and reflections from the students in the ELA classroom as well as the Content Link (content development course for ELs) and Latinos in Action (mentoring program for
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academically successful Latin@s) courses. The study was conducted formally over a period of two months, with six months of informal preparation that included participant selection.

One of the major emphases of the research was on the students and teacher co-learning and co-teaching in third space. Bruna (2009) warns that third space cannot be genuinely developed by the teacher but instead must come from the students. In fact, teacher-centered third space becomes artificial, a pedagogical technique discussed in textbooks and multicultural slideshows at in-service days. However, the third space can be teacher-facilitated and still be student-created and student-centered.

Context

The high school is located in a mountain ski town in the United States with White students (74%), Latin@ students (22%) and other races/ethnicities (4%). In this school, 23% of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, primarily Latin@ students. All teachers in the school were required to earn their ESL endorsement within three years of employment but many completed it through the district. The teacher-researcher teaches American Literature. The classroom was a mix of Latin@ and White students, and included students who had Special Education services and students who were classified as English learners. Class size ranged from 23-34 students. The class of 34 had the most ELs, with five, as well as six other Latin@ students who were not in ESL services.

Participants

The participant group consisted of 18 eleventh grade Latin@ students who were in the teacher researcher’s ELA and CL courses, 7 boys and 11 girls. The students’ language proficiency based on the World Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) scores
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ranged from Level 2 Emerging to Level 6 Reaching English Language Proficiency, and they were all Mexican origin. Some of the students were undocumented immigrants to the U.S., some were resident immigrants, and others were U.S citizens born in the United States to parents who emigrated from Mexico. All of the students had been classified as English Learners and benefited from English as a Second Language (ESL) services, but some of them had been removed from ESL classes and were enrolled in only mainstream coursework with occasional checks from the ESL coordinator. We purposely chose students from varying academic backgrounds, ranging from struggling students who were failing multiple classes to students who were in honors and AP courses.

Data Collection

We collected the data from three different sources. First, the teacher used observations in the form of field notes from his classroom instruction and regular reflection with the LifeSize camera system. The LifeSize system is a rear-wall mounted camera and monitor that the teacher can control remotely. The system also includes a mobile microphone. The teacher can preprogram the camera to film different angles of the classroom. In this way, the teacher can record one-on-one student interactions, or whole class instruction quickly with a remote click. At the end of the class, the camera wirelessly uploads the new video to a private school server, where the teacher can access the video for reflection. The film acts as metaphorical “game film,” and allows the teacher and students to watch the lessons efficiently and provide reflective feedback. In this way the teacher can assess instruction immediately with audio and video playback from any computer. Most of the ideas for group interaction dynamics, such as how, in open choice group work, Latin@ students only worked with other Latin@ students and White students only worked with White students, came from these teacher reflections with the
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assistance of the LifeSize camera. The teacher used the camera throughout the entire process to document student interactions.

The second data set came from transcription of the film-based interviews. In total, the teacher recorded 450 minutes of footage every two weeks for two months from his three 11th grade English classes, totaling 1,800 minutes of classroom recordings. He did not record his 10th grade English class or his Journalism class. Then, the teacher selectively removed 60 minutes of footage from four specific lessons to analyze and share with students. The teacher took field notes related to student interaction and his own movement and interaction with students during the lessons. From these notes, the teacher generated questions to ask the students that specifically related to the motivations behind their interactional choices of the lesson, as well as how the teacher’s actions changed the way the student’s learned and interacted with other students. For the film viewing, the teacher arranged students in a quiet room around a circular table and watched the film with them on the computer. First, he asked them to simply watch the footage to familiarize themselves with the lesson since it had been a few weeks since they participated. Next, they re-watched the film, but only after he asked them to consider their actions in the footage. This was the why behind their interactions. In that way, the teacher coded the first round of viewing film for what happened in the classroom by himself; then, the students who watched the film and answered questions provided the why answers for what happened. The teacher recorded the audio of these film sessions with the students and transcribed them. After transcribing, he re-coded for themes students noted, and from those codes generated more questions for the focus group interviews without film. In short, the film session’s interviews and reflections provided the first round of codes used to create questions for the focus group interviews.
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Third, we used the focus group interviews to build the themes and recognize racism intertwined with interaction that occurred throughout the school outside of the teacher’s classroom. The teacher would ask a question to the whole group, and allow the students to volunteer to answer each question. Then, the teacher would ask follow-up questions to each student in the group. Every interview was recorded, and the recordings were transcribed and re-coded before the next interview was conducted. The focus groups also provided emotional testimonies, as Latin@ students revealed instances of racism in their classrooms. While the film sessions used students specifically in the teacher’s classroom, the focus group interviews included students who were not in the teacher’s courses as well as his own students. The second focus groups included a range of student abilities, with high and low GPAs as well as students in Special Education. These groups were usually four to six students in size, and lasted roughly 45 minutes. In total, the teacher conducted six focus groups, three with film and three without film.

Data Analysis

We implemented a constant-comparative method (Hatch, 2002; Litchman, 2010; Mills, 2010) to analyze the data gathered. While watching the classroom videos, we noted interactions and body language using thick description. Then, in interviews, we showed students the tapes of the lessons. Students then explained and reflected on their actions in the class videos related to CIs which we recorded. In addition, we read through focus group and interview transcripts, and the teacher journal, to generate codes and identify significant quotes. The quotes and codes pulled from the interview transcripts acted as vignettes to demonstrate scenarios consistent with the themes, especially regarding S2S and S2T interactions.

Findings and Discussion
As the teacher interviewed the students, we were hoping to note the differences in how students created third space between students of differing academic stature and social standing. We postulated one of two outcomes: Either the Latin@ students would all share similar difficulties creating third space regardless of their achievement; or the ability to create third space for lower performing students would differ from the higher performing students. The themes that emerged as the interviews progressed aligned with outcome number one. Third space creation for Latin@ students was similar regardless of their academic standing. The outcome implies that academic achievement is not as important to third space creation as race, ethnicity, and social interaction between students, their peers, and the teacher.

The following are two overarching themes of third space for the Latin@ students within the classroom:

1. Colonialism contributes to racism (perpetuates the status quo)
   a. “I feel uncomfortable”: Student interaction
   b. Silence as colonialism: Teacher interaction
   c. Colonial school structure

2. Critical Interaction (can either create third space or perpetuate colonial space)
   a. Student to student: Student facilitated
   b. Student to student: Teacher facilitated
   c. Student to teacher interaction

First, we noted systemic racism and the tension of binaries between Latin@ ELs and White students as well as Latin@ ELs and White teachers. When students noted these tensions, racism was the primary perceived reason. Second, we identified that Critical Interaction between all members had the greatest general impact determining whether the students were successful or
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not in generating third space. In a theory as abstract as third space, the two themes add structure for considering how Latin@ students negotiate school culture.

**Systematic racism: Negative impact on third space in the classroom**

In all interviews, racism was linked with a colonized space where Latin@ students ideas, voices, or even position within the space was not valued or marginalized. If students and teachers created third space, it always usurped those colonial, dominant paradigms. Listening to the students, we noted examples of both in S2S and S2T interactions. Later, we will analyze examples where third space disrupted the dominant paradigm.

**Vignette: “I feel uncomfortable”: Student interaction.**

During the interview process, students often used the term “uncomfortable” to describe situations where the interaction was negative and where racism was evident. Part of our inquiry was related to whether racism created a colonized space, and whether Latin@ student’s skills, knowledges, and roles in the classroom were valued. When asked about how being “uncomfortable” made it difficult to collaborate within groups, Maria said, “You can’t contribute the way you want to. Like they [White students] don’t like your ideas. And you can’t work well together because it is uncomfortable” (Student Focus Group Interview, February 12, 2014).

Maria brought ideas and knowledge to the group, but could not contribute because the group did not appreciate her input. The issue was not that she could not understand the material, but rather she could not navigate the interaction to use her ideas in that colonialized space. If her learning was limited the group’s learning was also limited because the other students were missing out on her input. In this case, she missed an opportunity to create a third space where she could collaborate for learning with her White peers.
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In instances where students were also struggling with material, racism compounded their learning struggles and added to the dominant/lesser colonial paradigm. Alejandra, an 11th grade honors student reflected, “We know for a fact that some kids are racists, so like when you are around them you don’t want to be there. It’s all awkward and sometimes when you really don’t know the material, that makes it even worse” (Student Focus Group Interview, February 12, 2014). Obviously not knowing the material was a problem for any student in any class, but when group interaction was marbled with racial tension, the isolation of the student was exacerbated and they had little hope for learning. It is essential to note that racism is linked with decreased academic achievement (Singleton, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1999). When students feel racism, they cannot participate in class effectively, they cannot communicate in groups appropriately, and it prevents them from engaging with the material equally with other students (Kohli, 2008)

Vignette: Silence as colonialism: Teacher interaction.

The common factor in creating third space for students was the role of the teacher. As stated by Bruna (2009), third space cannot be created by the teacher and must come from the students. However, as the figurehead of the neocolonial structure, the actions of the teacher could adversely underscore Latin@ student’s ability to generate third space and promote a racialized classroom environment. We looked at student’s third space based on the S2T and S2ST CI. First, we focused on the negative impacts of S2T communication with underlying racism that perpetuated the colonial paradigm.

This example occurred in the classroom with a high-achieving, AP-level Latina student named Itzel. The problem was not the teacher’s individual racism, but instead the teacher’s inability to react to overt and acceptable racism from a student that was part of a colonized space. DiAngelo explains that this racism is part of the water we drink (2011). In other words, it’s
systemic. During a pre-assessment on the computer, a White student addressed Itzel in what she perceived to be racist comment. The interviewer asked Itzel to expand what happened and this was her response:

…and the quiz was like ‘what border is below the United States” or something, and this kid was like ‘they should change the question to where do Mexicans jump the border to the U.S’ or something like that. And the teacher kind of just stayed quiet, they didn’t know what to say at all. I kind of got mad, I was like, ‘shouldn’t you (the teacher) be saying something about that?’ I got out of the room and just left. I was not wanting to be there. (Student Focus Group Interview, February 12, 2014)

Itzel’s position in the classroom was relegated to *lesser*, and as a result the classroom was a place where the White student’s influence completed dominated her position. Earlier, we cited Barton and Tan (2008) and the politics of third space, and in this case the White student’s comment is infused with racial politics of immigration (Macedo, 2000; Feagin, 2001). Some may argue that this situation reflects the politics of immigration and not color, but given the racially-charged discussion behind the Mexico-U.S. border debates, this statement indicates racism. Feagin (2002) explains, “Typically, the conception of a group of human beings as somehow ‘alien,’ as an inferior ‘race,’ is substantially generated and maintained by those with great power and authority. Throughout United States history, ordinary white Americans have usually learned their stereotyped views of the racialized ‘other’ from those in authority, including parents, politicians, teachers, clergy, business leaders, and media authorities” (p. 959). In this case, it was unclear why the teacher responded in the way they did. Regardless, the White student’s comment indicated that he assumed “Mexicans jumped fences” and demonstrated no indication that his comments might impact Itzel. He demonstrated negative attitudes towards Mexican migration, and the teacher’s silence indicated that the comment was appropriate to the other students. The
teacher’s silence may indicate he is unprepared to address the racism from the student, and resorted to muteness as a de facto reaction (Pollock, 2008; Singleton, 2013). The lack of response impacted Itzel in a negative way. She expected the teacher to recognize the racism and act to defuse the comment. Wellman (2004) defines racism in Rothenberg as a “system of advantage based on race” (p.127). In this case, the White student who made the comment was free to invoke a prejudicial ideology without reprimand or discussion, a privilege that exists within the education system because the student is White. The teacher, unable to respond effectively, sends a “cultural message” (Rothenberg, 2004, p. 127) that this racist statement is acceptable within the classroom. It could be easy to set aside this reaction as one instance of individual oversight, but Rothenberg (2004) also cites that people who “do not embrace overtly prejudicial thinking” (p. 127) can still be racist because they defend their systemic advantage. The White teacher could potentially defend the lack of response in the same way, and their privilege as the position of the teacher allows them to defend that response. Instead, silence left Itzel wondering the teacher’s true intentions. Itzel was no longer able to contribute beneficially to the classroom, leaving her unable to create a third space with her White peers and teacher. Racism from the student created a barrier to third space construction, and the learning potential of the entire class is lost from alienating a talented Latina student. The result of this interaction is a return to the status quo, the colonial system where the White student’s comment was not challenged to the detriment of the Latina student. This incident is an example of many teachers’ inability to respond to racism in the classroom due to factors such as lack of experience, professional development and support (Singleton, 2013; Pollock, 2008; Vaught & Castengo, 2008).

Vignette: “The Only Mexican” and Isolation.
Admittedly, phrasing the sub-theme as, “The Only Mexican” seemed coarse and stereotypical because all Latin@s are obviously not Mexican. However, in our study ELs were Latin@ ELs were Mexican. In the United States, the name for people from Mexico can be misconstrued into a racist term with negative connotations and inflections. As White researchers, using the title “The Only Mexican” made us anxious because we felt the pressure of the underlying societal negativity associated with calling someone Mexican because they are dark skinned, whether they are Mexican or from a different country. We felt the hidden meaning. After some reflection, we realized that our anxiety was from personal experiences outside this context, and had nothing to do with why students were using the term. They used the word for identity only. In some cases they were literally the only Mexican in the room. We were reminded that if data leaves you feeling uncomfortable it is worth analyzing (Gallagher-Guertsen, 2012). We concluded that the term did not belong to us; it belonged to the students. For many years, public schools have ignored the self-claimed identity of students and supposed that all students, regardless of their race, cultural identity, or social class needed the same school system. “The Only Mexican” is just another way students used identity to create their own space in school. With this explanation, “The Only Mexican” became a key component of identity and third space for our students.

The theme of “The Only Mexican” can be a by-product of racism, however it can also exist separately from racist inclinations from White students and teachers. What makes “The Only Mexican” different is that students can feel isolated through colonized racism, because they are literally the only Mexican-origin student in the room. Particularly, students placed in higher academic tracks noted this theme more than students in lower academic tracks during the interviews. The Latin@ students at our school are only 3.5% of the Honors and AP track
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population, even though they are over 22% of the overall student population. Thus, they have an even higher chance of encountering isolation by being “The Only Mexican” in a room of White students in those upper-level courses. Conversely, because of the high number of AP and Honors English classes, most of the regular English classes have multiple Latin@ students. One of the teacher’s classes has 10 Latin@s in a class of 32, whereas the AP courses may have one Latin@ student in the same size classroom.

Most Latin@ students in the 11th grade CL (Content Link class) were also in the teacher’s English class. But there were also a few students in CL who were also in Honors ELA or AP English Language. At the beginning of the study, Lidi, one of the Latina students in Honors ELA who was also in the teacher’s CL class, switched into his regular ELA class, leaving behind Stephanie, another CL Latina student in the Honors course. While they were not close friends, they did socialize often at school and were both undocumented students from Mexico. A few days after Lidi dropped the honors course for the regular ELA class, the teacher was helping Stephanie with her English homework in CL. She lamented that she was struggling in English and felt alone without Lidi in class with her. He reminded her that she was completely capable of succeeding academically in Honors ELA. She responded by saying, “But I hate being in that class. I’m the only Mexican, and I sit by myself.” She said she sat in the middle of the room but felt isolated, and described it like “her own little island” and without Lidi she felt stranded (Research Journal Entry, February 2, 2014). While there were numerous factors that seemed to affect her ability to succeed in that class, she told him in an informal conversation that isolation was the primary reason she transferred courses. For Lidi, she could not create a third space because she was completely isolated from other students, other ideas, and other learning
opportunities. She lacked the chance to construct third space and lost the learning potential that comes with those opportunities.

Another student, Sara, noticed her own isolation in a class discussion on immigration for Social Studies. The rhetoric of the discussion, where students were using terms like “illegal alien” to describe undocumented immigrants made her feel isolated. She explained the situation when the class talked about immigration in the interview:

Well me, I really don’t like it when they (students) use the term illegal because automatically the (White) students are like, are you illegal? (She ended this sentence by mimicking the White students sideways glances and accusatory looks.) …It’s just so uncomfortable, I feel like they (teachers) should know what words to use, because if you say one word automatically the students have like this picture in their mind, like one of my teachers used that term and then, next thing you know a kid was like ‘well tell those Mexicans blah blah blah’ like, so, its really weird when they use the word and everybody just stares. (Student Focus Group Interview, February 12, 2014)

In this conversation, Sara indicates that her skin color is associated with lack of credibility, assumptions, and negativity. (2002) indicates that “The role of middle- and upper middle-class whites in circulating negative images of Mexican immigrants, other Mexican Americans, and other Latinos can be seen in the commonplace mocking of Spanish and Latino cultures” (p. 980). In this case, the comments be the other White students seemed to be accepted and natural in the setting contributing to Sara’s perception of “us” and “them” Discourse.

This vignette offers one intersection between the upcoming theme, Critical Interaction (CI), and “The Only Mexican”. CI is principal in combating “The Only Mexican” isolation and facilitating student construction of third space. Through co-reflection between the Latin@
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students and the teacher, we were able to identify factors related to the “The Only Mexican” Racism, and begin creating third space in the classroom.

Critical Interaction: Finding third space in the classroom

Third space can be created between students of any traditionally marginalized group, as long as they exist within the education system that is postcolonial. Even without White students, the culture of schools in the U.S. is Western-Euro-centric and acts as the colonizer of those students. However, because the high school teacher was working specifically with ELs who are also Latin@, our study only analyzed those Latin@ versus White interactions. Additionally, the students recognized this binary and were aware of the difference in Latin@ versus White students. For example, we asked our students to reflect on how their lives differed from their White peers, specifically related to their home roles. The cultural position of students outside of school is a critical piece of third space (Moje et al. 2004; Soja 1996) although it should not be seen as a binary opposite to student’s in-school experiences, because the experiences outside of the school can be applied in the school setting through Funds of Knowledge. This difference was important though, because our Latin@ students saw personal commitments and home difficulties that made it difficult to relate to the White students, thus making S2S CI problematic. Kristina discussed her personal experiences versus the perceived experiences of her White peers in a focus interview:

I feel like we (Latin@s and Whites) live in completely different worlds. Because even if we tried talking to, like, an American, it is kind of like, what are you going to talk about if they are not going to understand you? And I'm not going to understand why they just go home and do [nothing], while I'm over here, like, helping my mom with my brother, like teaching my brother how to read, or whatever, and then doing my homework, and then going to work. So it’s kind of like, I feel like, I don't know, it's just kind of different because there is really nothing to talk
Kristina felt the separation between her home culture and her White peer’s home culture. Her home responsibilities seemed greater than the responsibilities of the White students in her class. Thus, because of their different cultural identities, she felt she could not talk or interact with White peers because they would not understand her jobs outside of school. This is a critical point, because third space is contingent on the students building the third space together, Latin@ students in an emancipatory role and White students as non-dominating to work against the colonial paradigm. If a Latina student feels she cannot engage with her White peers, constructing third space is not possible. If she felt uncomfortable interacting with her White peers, she would have difficulty in any group work requiring her to navigate CI. She believed she was dichotomized from the White culture, which also reflected the neocolonial education structures. Gallagher-Geurtsen (2012) reinforces Kristina’s sentiments when she writes, “neocolonial institutions, such as schools, consistently and repetitively utilize hierarchies and binaries to classify people, knowledge, and ideas…One side of the binary is always considered to be superior to or more legitimate than the other side” (pp. 6-7). Third Space would counteract those binaries. Unfortunately, Kristina felt inferior to the dominate White culture because her home roles made her feel she could not connect with the White students in her class who had different responsibilities outside school.

Our Latin@ students realized the current structure favored White students over Latin@ students, catering to White student’s home culture, and making White students the neocolonial superior to the Latin@ students in all interactions. CIs occurred within this binary power structure. To begin the vignettes on CIs, we will present examples of S2S and S2T CI that
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perpetuate colonized space. Then, we will transition to vignettes that model ways S2S, S2T, and S2ST CI have helped build third space for the students in the classroom.

**Vignettes: Student-to-Student Interaction (S2S).**

S2S interaction existed in two forms. First, S2S shows students interacting during activities without structure and scaffolding for the social aspects of the lesson. Second, S2ST where the teacher has highly-structured the roles that helps students navigate the content within groups. Within our study, the data demonstrated that the more structured the group roles, the greater the chances of creating third space. We will share the data to illustrate this pattern, less structured group roles to more structured group roles, and show how teacher facilitation can help create third space or reinforce colonial structures.

For many of our Latin@ students, they noted struggles within group work, especially when working with White peers, when they had no assigned group roles. Often the CI prevented students from creating third space because of unfamiliarity between Latin@ and White students. In some cases, racism caused the rift between the two groups. In other instances, stereotypes about culture and uncertainty about “the other group” made negative CI and increased isolation for the Latin@ students. Carlos expressed frustration at these group dynamics when talking about his lab group’s interaction.

> When I’m doing a lab, and I don’t really know these people they kind of don’t ask me anything, there’s like no way for me to contribute ‘cuz, um, I feel uncomfortable even speaking to them and they probably think that I don’t know anything at all. (Student Focus Group Interview, February 12, 2014)

The obvious issue stated by Carlos is that he felt that he could not contribute because of the social implications, not the difficult content. The underlying problem, however, was that Latin@ students and White students lacked familiarity with one another. Carlos then predicted
that the White students had preconceived views on what he knew because he was Latino. The tension meant that Carlos could not even speak, let alone contribute to the lab. The divide was not only by skin color, but a barrier of difference between the Latin@ and White students. Carlos’ point also reflects Kristina’s earlier statements that the home lives of Latin@ and White students are so different that they cannot understand each other and interact effectively. If they do not know each other before the group lesson begins, the Latin@ student’s group work will stagnate because they feel separate from the White students. Itzel reflected those same feelings from her incident with the outspoken student on the geography quiz. She asserted that she would no longer put full effort into the course after feeling alienated in that discussion (Student Focus Group Interview, 2014). Our findings concur with Soto’s (2014) study that emphasizes the challenges and importance of group work with long term ELs. The findings suggest teacher modeling and student interdependence to support positive group work. The next vignette highlights how teachers can positively influence third space through facilitation.

**Vignette: Student-to-Student Teacher Facilitated Interaction (S2ST)**

The previous vignette was a case study under little teacher facilitation. For third space creation, the teacher must analyze the dynamics of the class and assign roles and carefully construct student interaction. One example comes from the second focus group that engaged heavily with the video recordings from the LifeSize camera to reflect on their own S2S CI in two separate activities. The two activities were meant to compare differences in CI depending on how much the teacher facilitated the classroom activity.

In the first activity, students were allowed to pick the peers that they would interact with as they worked. The activity had ten parts, with different pairs having a single part. The students could move around the room and choose the other pairs to work with to complete all ten
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parts within the activity. The second activity, which occurred on a different day, did not allow
the students to choose their groupings. Each student had a role for the activity based on their
initial table assignment, and after each round the students moved tables per the teachers
discretion, so that when each student finished they had worked in four different groups of four
students. The interactions in each group were coordinated based on the roles. Two days after
filming both classes the focus group reflected on what activity helped them learn and feel
“comfortable”. They watched film clips that showed them participating in different types of
interaction from the two lessons and they discussed the pros and cons to each lesson as applied to
the learning and third space.

Interestingly, two of the three girls preferred the heavily teacher facilitated activity over
the student-choice grouping. In the student-choice grouping, we noticed that the 10 Latin@
students in the class worked together, but almost completely avoided White students. However,
when given the option during the interviews, they stated they would rather work in more
structured group roles, a decision that meant conversing heavily with White students. When the
teacher asked our Latina students which activity helped them learn the best, Ana pointed at the
second, more structured video grouping and said,

I like hearing from different people (different meaning not Latin@). Sometimes I learn better
with that one (pointing at video) because there are other people’s opinion. Some people that
know more. Because if I haven’t read or understood then I can understand better. (Student Focus
Group Interview, January 17, 2014)

Ana recognized that all students have the capacity to share knowledge, and she
appreciated the structured atmosphere because it bridged the social gap and moved straight to
content manipulation. By facilitating the activity, Ana was able to construct knowledge with the
group. The structure of the activity aided the move for Ana, which lessened the pressure she felt
to make that decision on her own, thus lowering the risk involved socially to navigate that space. The teacher lowered her affect with the structure and allowed her to learn within the third space. For Ana, this meant new learning, new possibilities, and new confidence to succeed in a third space because she was not stuck as the *lesser* in the colonized classroom structure. Realistically, this is not a perfect third space, because Ana is still not viewing herself as the leader or the dominate student in the group. It allowed her to effectively interact with white peers, but was not a strong enough interaction to create genuine third space. It lacked the emancipatory component. However, in the activity without the teacher facilitation, the students struggled in a colonized, separated space where they never moved toward a third space, and as a result were limited in new learning to only those students of the same race.

The students commented on other teachers who practiced the same S2ST and the practice also resonated as beneficial with the students. Itzel noted the same activity in a different class.

I say like, in [________ class], since I have like no body there, um, well what [Ms.________] does is she like, gives a problem out, and for each step there's a different person, so if you don't really understand one step, then the other person is like, oh well you kind of have to do this, like awkwardly, but we actually do talk. (Student Focus Group Interview, February 12, 2014).

The awkward interaction reflected the students navigating towards the third space. It was awkward because they were not familiar with one another. Itzel was also the only Latina in that class. The step-by-step process meant the group was only successful if everyone understood each step. If one student was confused, their partners had to explain the step to them so that the group could be successful. For Itzel, this required discussion and learning in a group where she would typically be isolated without facilitation. The teacher was purposefully providing the structure that lowered her affect and improved student’s third space. In this class, she was “The
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Only Mexican,” but she was still able to create third space because her first steps were scaffolded by the teacher. The whole group, including Itzel, benefitted academically from the activity. Itzel was able to expand her learning beyond what she could do in the typical interactive space, and the White students were not allowed to dominate due to the specific rules of the group project. We also feel that this is only the surface, the simple beginning of third space. To fully achieve the potential of third space, Itzel would need the ability to lead, to find new learning beyond the basic content of the lesson. We will address this issue further in the conclusion.

When constructing S2S CI, third space happened more easily when students could avoid navigating the social, cultural, and racial undercurrents and instead focused only on the content. Creating highly teacher-facilitated activities provided the organization needed to lower the affective filter while also improving the possibility of third space. In the previous vignettes, the teachers addressed all three parts of Krashen’s Affective Filter for all group members. They were motivated to assist each other because the group would not be successful without each member participating. The Latin@ students were self-confident because they knew if they struggled with their piece the group would support them. Lastly, the Latin@ student’s anxiety decreased because they were not required to navigate group space on their own. This allowed for Latin@ students to move out of the colonial paradigm, and gradually move toward the third space.

Admittedly, teachers cannot predict every wrinkle of student civility, but with S2ST CI they can begin to improve the chances for students to create third space and promote learning within groups, despite neocolonial pressures. Outside of the S2S interaction, teachers can also improve third space creation through direct one-on-one engagement with students. In the next
vignettes, our Latin@ participants reflect on how teachers can positively or negatively help create third space within S2T CI.

**Vignettes: Student to Teacher Interaction (S2T).**

As previously mentioned by Bruna (2009), the teacher plays a special role in third space development, because the teacher is the dominant figure in the neocolonial system (Gallagher-Geurtsen, 2012). They have the ability to influence third space more than any one student. The participating students noted instances where the teacher’s actions either helped create a third space or reinforced the dominant colonial paradigm depending on how they directly interacted with a specific student.

This next vignette returns to Sara, who nervously recalled struggles creating third space in a previous class. For her, the teacher’s interaction reinforced Sara’s position as the dominated individual and raised the affective filter to the point where she could not learn anymore. The teacher used “calling on” students as a management tool to control talking. Sara is an EL and still clarifies content in Spanish, using code-switching with partners to find meaning. If the teacher felt she was off-task, he would call on her to answer questions. He rarely, however, used the same methods on the White students. Whether she was on task or not, the stress she felt in the classroom made learning almost impossible. Sara felt that she was singled out, and as a result isolated. Her learning strategy of code-switching was not valued by the teacher in the same way as the monolingual students. She shared the story in the interview.

Ooooo, like [Mr. _____], I didn’t learn anything, like you know, like he always called on us (Latina students) and I was really terrified because I kind of know but sometimes I didn’t, and so when he calls on me I was terrified and didn’t pay attention, it was more scared of being called upon than I was learning, and it was horrible. (Student Focus Group Interview, January 29, 2014)
“Terrified”, “scared”, and “horrible” were words that Sara described for this classroom space. The added pressure of learning in a second language and being one of the few Latinas in the classroom created an insurmountably barrier to creating third space for Sara. The affective filter was too high, because she was isolated as the “The Only Mexican.” She felt too scared to learn given the classroom management tool utilized by the teacher. In terms of the third space, her code-switching should be highlighted and encouraged by the teacher as a way to “build bridges from knowledges and Discourses often marginalized in school settings to the learning of conventional academic knowledges and Discourses” (Moje et al., 2004, p. 43). If she is punished for her code-switching, that reinforces the dominant colonial paradigm that Spanish is less valued than English in the classroom. To encourage third space, the teacher should encourage that ability as a special skill that can elevate her in the classroom, and find new ways she can use her bilingualism as a gift rather than a detriment to her learning. Punishing for it evokes memories of colonial powers forcefully manipulating students to use English-only in classrooms, like Native American students in Bureau of Indian Affairs Boarding Schools (Macedo, 2000).

The expectation for any classroom is that the student and teacher interaction will foster positive relationships. Diaz-Rico & Weed (2010) cite various ideas for creating positive student-teacher relationships. The first tip states teachers should “express care and respect equally to all students” (p. 288). Calling on Sarah to discipline her for clarifying concepts with her partner did not show equal respect for Sarah compared with the dominant English speaking White students in the class. While any student can have a negative reaction to that management tool, Sara is especially affected because she is also processing language. The teacher, had he known Sara’s need to code-switch, could have changed his management tool. Instead, he reinforced the colonial paradigm. Within that space, Sarah’s learning stalled.
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Although teacher’s practices can reinforce colonized classroom space, the students reflected on other circumstances where a teacher facilitated third space creation where there was not enough S2S interaction to foster third space on a peer-level. In these cases, the teacher was able to insert themselves as dominant co-creators of third space with the student. Alejandra experienced a teacher who helped create third space in this way during the last school year. We asked her what was more important to creating third space: the interaction of students in class or the one-on-one interaction of the Latin@ students and the teacher:

I think the teacher because, because in my math class, I don’t really have any friends in there but [Ms. Thompson] is always being nice, and she is always coming to me. I’m the only Senior, so she’s always coming back to me and I feel comfortable in that class. (Alejandra, 11th Grade, Student Focus Group Interview, February 12, 2014)

Alejandra placed high importance on S2T CI, specifically emphasizing how the one-on-one time showed the teacher cared about her, making her feel more comfortable and creating positive third space, because she was able to “talk about new ideas without being all nervous (Student Focus Group Interview, 2014). Without that positive teacher relationship, those ideas would never be present, because she would not have been willing to explore them in the classroom. The S2T CI in this vignette shows the impact individual attention can have for Latin@ students who are faced with the feeling of isolation. The teacher, together with Alejandra, created third space that fostered concern for Alejandra’s learning, allowing her a better place to succeed. Though the ability for a teacher to create completely “safe” place is near impossible in a colonial space (Leonardo & Porter, 2010), an attempt to lower the affective filter through carefully constructed activities, choice of content, and intentional group roles can bring students closer to third space.

Significance of the study
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We know from speaking with ELs and observing them in the school context that the opportunity to create third space was usually missed, and the dominant colonial paradigm was reinforced, despite the best intentions and practices of teachers working with ELs through SIOP and other school initiatives intended to support them. The significance of this study was two-fold. First, to discover ways the teacher could facilitate third space in his own classroom, thus improving his classroom culture and the academic success of the ELs in his English class. Second, we aimed to identify ways the school could facilitate third space so that ELs are succeeding in all classrooms and in all content areas.

Through this action research, we did not aim to find grand fixes across all educational settings for implementing third space. Realistically, best practice in one classroom may not be best practice in another classroom with different contexts and cultural groups. The cultural and linguistic capital of each space will differ, depending on the region, district, and school. However, we believe teachers have the responsibility as activists and advocates to pursue and facilitate third space, regardless of the combinations of cultures in the space. Failure to facilitate third space pushes equality away from students who are marginalized in schools, and ignores the gap in opportunities for those students (Cerecer et al., 2007).

**Conclusion: Recommendations for Educators on CI and Third Space**

Teachers must be aware of the CI in their classroom. When teachers learn how to facilitate activities so that English learners can easily build and navigate third space, learning is enhanced. Secondly, teachers should understand their position as the head of neocolonial classroom to build trusting relationships so that they can help build third space with their students for S2T and S2ST CI. Lastly, educators have to be experts on their classroom culture and the spaces that surround their communities. They should recognize when students may feel
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isolated, as in cases of “The Only Mexican”, which comes from spending time outside of school in their students’ communities so that they can recognize students’ funds of knowledge, lived histories as immigrants, and the discourse that they encounter. Recognition can prevent losing students academically who are most impacted by high affect who may struggle constructing third space.

Facilitating third space and CI can be done in practical ways. Reflexivity was not only important for the study, but it was critical for evaluating third space. Students should have meaningful reflection on their own learning, especially the social components. The LifeSize camera facilitated key reflection in the study. Watching film and discussing third space and “The Only Mexican” made students aware of those ideas. As the teacher interviewed Latin@ students, the students were able to self-identify moments when they chose to interact with only other Latin@ students, while also explaining how specific activities allowed them to build learning with all students. In one interview, a student offered ideas for facilitating third space, stating that teachers need to work harder to “mix Latina girls with Latina girls and White girls with White girls” (Student Focus Group Interview, January 29, 2014). Another Latino expressed how he didn’t like the idea of mixing students, because he was not comfortable working with white students. (Student Focus Group Interview, January 29, 2014). In the interviews, students became the leaders, offering the teacher advice and ideas, while also stating their insecurities. In this way, the students have more agency in their own education, an important component of third space.

Outside of the teacher’s immediate classroom, the views of the students in the focus groups have spread to other settings. This year, new Latin@ students who were not involved in the study have discussed ways to build third space. As part of their personal advocacy, they now
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Talk about third space and “The Only Mexican” in their LIA classes, and one of the teacher’s current student cited the study, saying they stayed in AP classes specifically because they did not want to be criticized for dropping a class on account of being “The Only Mexican” (Student Individual Interview, 2015). These discussions came directly from the teacher sharing his research with other teachers, who are now discussing third space openly with their students. When teachers and students can share third space openly, that allows for coteaching and colearning, an emancipatory practice for students and teachers. In addition, carefully planned professional development such as developed by Singleton (2013) on Courageous Conversations could give teachers support in navigating tough conversations involving race and ethnicity in the classroom.

For the teacher in the study, building relationships with students began with a conversation, and the observed benefits are easy to perceive through the lens of third space. The hidden value of the research interviews was not the content of the discussions, but the lasting relationships that came from extended one-on-one and small group time between a White teacher and his Latin@ students. Although the interviews were meant for data collection, they had the effect of improving third space construction in the classroom, because the teacher improved his CI with his students. Students’ opinions suddenly had meaning and added cultural capital, and as stated above, they brought these ideas to other classes and discussed those issues with their Latin@ peers. Beginning with the interviews, the teacher was able to foster genuine dialogue with the students that continued long after the research ended. Other researchers (Allen, 2007; Faltis & Valdez, 2010) have praised similar ongoing discussions that foster genuine dialogue and the role it plays in understanding and identifying oppression with students and creating loving relationships. Students who participated often asked the teacher about the progress of the
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research after the interviews finished, and continued the discussion in other classrooms with other Latin@ students; one student even checked in regularly about the progress of the paper. Those kinds of lasting influences contribute to third spaces. Participating in their own learning gave students an opportunity for dialogue about their personal agency in school.

In addition to best practice in strategies, this study revealed that awareness of third space, Critical Interactions (CI), and skill in navigating conversations about race in the classroom are essential to supporting Latin@ students in secondary schools. Administrators, teacher educators and teachers who critically analyze the way colonial spaces marginalize students can often illuminate practices and interactions allowing students to dynamically create third space. Further research on ways to enhance this practice through professional development and teacher education programs would be useful. Nonetheless, structural changes within the neocolonial educational system in the United States are also needed. Teachers and students within classrooms can only do so much if they are burdened with scripted curriculums, increasing reliance on standardized tests and an ever growing income disparity among students.

Moving forward, while the stories the students told demonstrate potential for third space, we believe that rarely do students create authentic third space in the classroom. The characteristics of third space, the emancipatory qualities that usurp the colonial paradigm require that marginalized students are highly aware of the way we are colonized. Even though third space can be a bridge from “knowledges and Discourses often marginalized in schools” (Moje et al., 2004) to traditionally valued academic knowledge, it has the potential to be more, to spark conversations about race and chip away at colonial paradigms impacting education. However, this level of third space will require infused paradigm shifts throughout the system. Until that
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happens, third space will not be emancipatory in the way that it can truly impact students who are marginalized.
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